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Keywords: internal armed conflict in Colombia; collective memory; sound art; violence; narratives

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Memory making through sound art as a way of resistance in Colombia

María Paula Suárez¹

Abstract

The article aims to analyze the work of art *Cantos silentes en cuerpos de madera* by Leonel Vásquez as an alternative narrative of the Internal Armed Conflict in Colombia. This narrative resists the hegemonic perception of the past that often ignores the experiences of the victims and seeks to tell the story of what happened from a single perspective. On the other hand, the selected artwork establishes a relationship with the past that highlights the multiplicity of experiences of violence and attends to the voices of the victims. To understand this better, Benjamin's postulates on history are going to guide the analysis. This case study will contribute to the understanding of how art can create complex memories of experiences of violence through its symbolic language and inclusive character, creating the space for justice in our relation towards the past and the victims of war.

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1. Introduction

In contexts of dictatorships, internal armed conflicts, and wars, it has become particularly relevant to think about how the creation of historical narratives are always processes crossed by power relations that enable their production. Moreover, how the past is understood and the discourses that talk about it are products of specific agendas. Colombia is a country that has faced an internal armed conflict for more than fifty years, ever since it has been struggling with the matter of creating a cultural memory that encompasses the experiences of victims and survivors of such war. This is the case because multiple actors have been part of this conflict, and the dynamics and forms of violence have been very complex and diverse. In such a context, the hegemonic discourse about the war, disseminated by politicians and the mainstream media, has often been over-simplistic and has turned a blind eye to most of the population's experiences. This means that it has told the story of what happened from a single perspective, favoring the dichotomic opposition between heroes and villains and using specific categories to understand the conflict, such as 'war against terrorism' that sought to deprive the armed confrontations of their political character. In this selectiveness, it has condemned to oblivion other experiences and other stories of violence.

On the other hand, different artistic practices have been committed to the creation of

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alternative narratives that resist this hegemonic discourse and the impulse to homogenize the experience of war in a single story. This paper aims to analyze the artwork *Canto silentes en cuerpos de madera* by the Colombian artist Leonel Vásquez as place where this process happens. To reflect on this matter, in the first place, it seems fundamental to briefly explain the main dynamics of the internal conflict in Colombia and how the dominant narrative has been created. This is key to reflect on why such a narrative is problematic and needs to be questioned and destabilized. Later, I will explain how the selected artwork positions itself as an alternative way of thinking about the past and building a narrative of what happened. Firstly, because it actively involves the victims who experience an event of violence directly in creating an art installation dedicated precisely to taking the time to listen to them. And secondly, since it configures a commemoration space, one could even say a monument, where there was none, using a symbolic language that seeks to do justice to the victims' experiences. By contrasting these two ways of creating narratives and memories of the war in Colombia, we will comprehend how artistic practices can positively impact the configuration of a fair and complex understanding of what happened during the years of war in the country. This case study will also contribute to understanding the political efficacy that art can have, particularly in contexts of violence.

2. Context and hegemonic historical narrative on the internal conflict in Colombia

The internal armed conflict in Colombia is a very complex historical process that, due to space, is not going to be described with the attention it deserves. Nevertheless, it is important to briefly explain, in general terms, what was the main dynamic of the war. The conflict originated with the emergence of the guerrilla groups formed during the 60s, mainly due to social injustice and inequality in land ownership. These groups decided to fight for their political aims through an armed confrontation, given that they found it impossible to achieve such purposes through the traditional political channels. The guerrillas that are still active today are the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN). During the 60s and the 80s, the armed confrontations were mainly between them and the state military forces. However, in the 80s and 90s, a third actor appeared: the paramilitary groups. They were primarily private armies, financed by actors such as drug traffickers, landowners, and powerful politicians mainly from radical right-wing parties that wanted to 'protect' themselves from the guerrillas. These groups often operated in collaboration with the military forces. They called themselves Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) and were officially active until the first decade of the twenty-first century when they signed a peace agreement. Most of the confrontations between these three actors happened in the countryside rather than in the urban areas. Therefore, the truth of what occurred is still blurred for the people that did not experience the violence directly. Thus, there is still no clarity or full recollection of all the violent events that Colombians had to live. Due to this lack of clarity, a dispute over the conflict's symbolism has also arisen. As we mentioned before, the victims' voices have not been heard since the dominant narrative privileges the homogenization of the events and the configuration of a single story. Likewise, in this configuration, it is common to forget singular violent experiences that do not fit within the narrative intended to perpetuate.

This was especially evident at the beginning of this century when the confrontation between

the Colombian military forces and these groups was framed within a different comprehension scheme, highly influenced by the global ‘war against terrorism’, led by the United States, after the attacks of September eleven. During this period, the category to designate the insurgent groups changed drastically, and they began to be addressed as narco-terrorist groups. Such a category implied a depoliticization of the conflict and treating the guerrilla members as any other criminals: “In this period (2002–2010) the change of discourse against FARC was notorious (...) the media would continue to reproduce this type of discourse and would achieve the sedimentation of the ‘narco-terrorist’ category”². With the conflict’s depoliticization, the confrontation between all actors would be reduced only to war against criminals and terrorists. In this scenario, the state would not have to assume responsibility for its violence because it would be justified in the urgency of defending its citizens from terrorism. Such a perspective forgets about the “structural violence and the distribution of privileges”³ that caused the extreme inequality in the country and are at the base of the armed confrontation. Under those circumstances, the dominant narrative on what happened was configured as a drastically antagonistic play between good and bad. The members of the military forces were seen as heroes of the nation, while the members of the FARC guerrilla, classified as terrorists, were presented as the maximum enemy of Colombian democracy:

The discursive practices that permeated the political world during the years of the conflict created dichotomous categories such as the hero-villain (...) the media (...) created a series of symbols around the redemptive character of those who defend ‘democracy’ while at the same time accentuated the corruption of those who transgress the democratic institutional order.⁴

This dichotomous perspective of the internal conflict and the category of narco-terrorist applied to guerilla groups in Colombia was disseminated through several media networks. A good example of this was the media treatment given to the attack against a social club in Bogotá called El Nogal in 2003 perpetrated by the FARC guerilla. The newspaper El Tiempo, one of the oldest and most influential in the country, devoted several pages to the story. The headlines were the following: ‘Terror in El Nogal’, ‘Scenes of panic’, ‘Panic in the north of Bogotá’. The discursive treatment given to this event aimed to portrait the guerrillas as a common enemy that spread terror among the civilian population.

Nevertheless, other atrocious events that are also part of Colombia’s history, such as the multiple massacres perpetrated by the paramilitary groups and even by the military forces, never received media coverage in the same way or scale. This was the case because within the hegemonic perspective, the phenomenon of paramilitarism was legitimized:

to the extent that the evil of the enemy could be demonstrated. Evidently, the examples in which the Colombian guerrillas were held responsible were so big that forgiving voices were heard towards those who, despite their tactics, saw the paramilitary groups as part of the defense line against the FARC.⁵

²Torres Mora et al, “La Narrativa Del Conflicto Armado Interno En Colombia: Una Construcción Política de La Historia,” 62, my translation.

³Castillejo Cuéllar, “Iluminan Tanto Como Oscurecen: De Las Violencias y Las Memorias En La Colombia Actual,” 53, my translation.

⁴Torres Mora et al, “La Narrativa Del Conflicto Armado Interno En Colombia: Una Construcción Política de La Historia,” 62.

⁵Castillejo Cuéllar, “La Globalización Del Testimonio: Historia, Silencio Endémico y Los Usos de La Palabra,”

In this sense, as sympathizers of the military and government forces in their fight against guerrillas as terrorists' groups, the paramilitary groups were never portrayed as enemies. This invisibility and silence about those actions represented an injustice against the victims of these crimes. Moreover, several victims' associations and social leaders have shown an intrinsic link between them and the military forces. Therefore, the state is also responsible for their massacres and other violent actions. The configuration of this dominant narrative dooms to oblivion the actions done by the actors who think of themselves as 'heroes' (in the case of the military forces) or 'necessary evils' in the case of paramilitary groups. Often these actors do not want to recognize their responsibilities and therefore violently make the experiences of violence of their victims invisible, depriving them of the symbolic debt of memory. In this sense, the dominant narrative creates an official version of history that thinks of itself as the only possible, true and objective. Doing so displays a particular violence since it decides to forget and remain silent about many other violent experiences.

Furthermore, the hegemonic discourse on the internal conflict of Colombia can be seen as the storm that drags the "angel of history" from the past into the future and forces him to forget about the ruins that he was facing in the first place. Even though this angel "would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed"⁶ the storm pulls him towards the oblivion of this violent past. It seems that what is at stake in this discourse constructed by the holders of the political and media power is a comprehension of time as a linear succession of objective events that are heading towards progress, and this urgency of progress is precisely that violent storm. Benjamin draws a critique of this idea of progress, since it entails a perception of time as something homogeneous and empty. This is also something that the author traces in the dissemination of information rather than the communication of experiences. "Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn"⁷. And precisely this communication of experiences implies a certain complexity that simple transmission of information, in its eagerness for objectivity and immediacy, cannot encompass. Storytelling is, therefore, a way of creating a memory that does not explain, but, evokes, shows and shares an experience that is beyond common language. On the other hand, "The prime requirement [of information] is that it appears 'understandable in itself' "⁸, objective and intelligible. Thus, it does not leave room for the singularity of the event, moreover, it reduces the experience of this happening to a simple caricature of itself. In this sense, it seems urgent to think of another language, another story, another narrative that can encompass that uniqueness and multiplicity of the experiences of violence, which the hegemonic discourse has sought to deny, forget and erase.

96, my translation.

⁶Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 249.

⁷Benjamin, 84.

⁸Benjamin, 89.

3. *Cantos silentes en cuerpos de madera* as a way of resistance towards the hegemonic discourse on the internal Conflict in Colombia

Within this framework, the work of art *Cantos silentes en cuerpos de madera* (2017) gains special relevance as an alternative way of creating memory in Colombia. The art installation engages in a more complex relationship with the past than the one we previously described as the dominant narrative for two main reasons. Firstly, it actively involves the victims who experience violence directly in the creation of the artwork. And secondly, it positions itself as an act of memory that commemorates an event that claimed to be remembered for a long time by using a symbolic language that seeks to do justice to the experience of violence. The artwork was done in 2017, shortly after the peace agreement between the national state and the FARC guerrillas was signed in 2016. This agreement established, among many other things, that all actors in the war should recognize their responsibilities and tell the truth about what happened. This included the state's military forces, paramilitary groups, guerrillas, and third parties involved in financing the war. The installation attempts to commemorate an act of violence that happened in a rural population in 1998. For almost twenty years, it remained invisible in the public imagination and discourses. The commemorated event was a bombardment perpetrated by the state military forces on the village of Santo Domingo's, Arauca, in which 17 peasants, who did not have any association with armed actors, were killed. The artist organized a workshop with the victims' relatives and asked them to record sounds that reminded the person. Vásquez also recorded the voices of the survivors describing the deceased or telling stories about them when they were still alive. Later, with these recordings, the artist composed a piece corresponding to each of the assassinated provincials. The installation consisted of seventeen sounded trees, each representing one of the deceased persons in the bombardment. Several electromagnetic devices were installed in the trees' roots to reproduce sounds, voices, songs and testimonies that were meant to recall the absents. The only way to listen to the compositions was through direct contact with the trees. The spectator had to put the ears in touch with the leaves or the stem, as shown in the image below. Each tree was installed on a bench where people could sit and listen to the sound compositions in the village's central area.

The work is then configured as a collective gesture of collaboration between the artist and the victims who survived the act of violence. In this sense, the narratives that operate within the work become multiple, providing richness to the record of what happened. The comprehension of the past becomes more complex since it implicates a multiplicity and heterogeneity of stories that resist the dominant discourse and the official single version of history. As we have seen, this hegemonic narrative is highly problematic because it reduces the singularity of the violent experiences to a single and unified description that proclaims itself as the only possible and true.

This gesture of remembering through a collaborative work is remarkable since this was the first time since the event in 1998 that the bombardment survivors talked about what happened publicly and engaged in a memory-making process. Before, the dominant discourse was always in the hands of the holders of political and media power, who, as the artist points out "created whenever they wanted, during those years, a new and adjusted version of what happened that fit their needs and interests"⁹. In that sense, this work of art is a clear attempt to challenge that

⁹Vásquez, "Cantos Silentes En Cuerpos de Madera," my translation.



Leonel Vásquez, *Cantos silentes en cuerpos de madera*, 2017,
<http://www.leonelvasquez.com/obra/cuerpo-para-una-voz-ausente/>.

discourse and try to disseminate other multiple stories that were ignored before. However, the victims did not have words to explain their pain; they did not know how to express the horrific violence that they went through. But not only due to the difficulty of finding the words to describe it but also because “that language has ceased to mean, its usual meanings suffer an irreversible cracking”¹⁰. For this reason, they were silent and reluctant to participate in this memory-making process, in which they were compelled to name something that was unnamable. As the artist points out:

*Why should we remember? We don't want to talk about the past, they said here and there. (...) In their voices, I felt as if the wounds that the past made in them had to close by themselves because of the need to continue with life (...) The possibility of the past was taken away from these people.*¹¹

However, after this first moment of doubt and even rejection of the remembrance exercise, they actively engaged in the process of memory-making suggested by the artist since they also wanted their voices to be heard and proliferated. The effort that the artwork is doing can be seen as analogous to that of the storyteller since the story always contains “the short-lived reminiscences,” a conglomeration of a variety of memories. This effort opposes the aim of the novelist, which is to fix the past a single story “dedicated to *one* hero, *one* odyssey, *one* battle”¹² while the story, and similarly this installation is dedicated “to many diffuse occurrences”¹³. The recollection of this multiplicity of testimonies was a job of constantly “listening to them, consulting with them at each moment, (...) collecting from their voices the remains of life, giving the deceased a body, a presence”¹³. Giving a living shape to the dead helped in the process of paying the debt of commemoration to those that are not present anymore. After this process, the artist wanted to share these collective narratives with other listeners since the art of storytelling is precisely the art of repeating stories¹⁴. To repeat them, one must listen carefully.

The fact that the sound could only be heard when the ears were very close to the trees speaks

¹⁰Acosta López, “La Narración y La Memoria de Lo Inolvidable: Un Comentario Al Ensayo ‘El Narrador’ De Walter Benjamin,” 179, my translation.

¹¹Vásquez, “Cantos Silentes En Cuerpos de Madera.”

¹²Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 98.

¹³Vásquez, “Cantos Silentes En Cuerpos de Madera.”

¹⁴Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 91.

about the artist's aim of making people pay close attention to what was being reproduced. "It is intended that listening becomes a conscious and bodily act"¹⁵. This awareness and willingness to listen is what guarantees memory, as something that passes from one storyteller to another. Moreover, the act of sitting down to listen also implies certain pausing to pay attention. To stop the maddening flow of images and sounds to give the attention that the dead deserve in an act that demands from the viewer a conscious action of remembering. As Bal puts it, describing the work of the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo: "our acts of viewing become, suddenly, acts of a different nature than just that of routine looking in a continuum"¹⁶. This implies a certain elongation of time, precisely of a time that claims to be taken seriously to fight against oblivion violence. "In the face of violence—that brutal stretching out of time to its breaking point—the importance of duration and the temporal density (...) stem from the need to counter oblivion"¹⁷. Vásquez work requires the viewer to take the particular time of remembering. It demands them to stop and listen to the voices of those who had been so long in silence and darkness; existing, precisely on the fringes of the official history and dominant narratives.

In the same fashion, the project's main aim was to commemorate the victims of the bombardment. In that sense, it could be seen as a memorial, even a monument. However, it was not a fixed and static monument that intended to hold "the 'eternal' image of the past"¹⁸ but rather a dynamic and open one that nourishes itself by the telling and retelling of the stories, songs, and testimonies. In this sense, it is a living, active and talking monument. The victims' voices are there to evoke the absent, giving them a shape and therefore tearing them away from the oblivion of death to make them live again among us. Furthermore, Vásquez, in a similar movement to Salcedo, "attempts to break the wall between private and public by bringing the disappeared victims of violence into the public domain, from which their murderous deaths had torn them away"¹⁹. In this sense, through the collective action of remembering, the personal enters the sphere of the public and solicits the recognition of a violence that otherwise would remain invisible and unheard.

The symbol of the tree also contributes to this configuration of a monument. It is important to note that *Cantos silentes en cuerpos de madera* is not a piece of stone that aims to be "big and awesome, with claims to eternity and permanence"²⁰. Even though there is an aim to commemorate and create a certain memory to endure in time, this enduring implicates a constant growth and transformation. In this sense, it cannot be seen as a traditional monument that pretends to capture a figure of the past in the present and detained it there; as if the past was some heavyweight that cannot move in any direction. Rather, it functions as a constant presence of the past in the present that is continuously changing and growing. The death that war has left turns into a seed that grows into a tree to keep itself alive within the living. The past violent memories are not buried in oblivion but rather rising in a speaking tree's shape. Besides, sound's materiality serves as a tool for the conjuration of the spirits of those not present anymore. The survivors' voices, their testimonies, and songs seek precisely to make the dead appear, conjuring and bringing them into the present. The artwork put us in "a face to face

¹⁵Vásquez, "Cantos Silentes En Cuerpos de Madera."

¹⁶Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art*, 139.

¹⁷Bal, 151.

¹⁸Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 264.

¹⁹Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art*, 152.

²⁰Huyssen, "Monumental Seduction," 191.

encounter with the other, with his/her routines, rituals, proximity”²¹. In this sense, if we want to establish a just relationship with the victims, it is necessary to listen to them with careful attention and give them space and time to remember and tell us their singular stories.

This urgency comes from the future as a demand of justice towards all the victims of Colombia’s war, to guarantee that something as atrocious will never happen again. As the artists put it “a calling to the responsibility that as Colombians we have towards the dead and ‘dead alive’ that the violence has left in this country”²². The living monument built by Vásquez and the survivors of this violent action responds to a “need for expression that facilitates communication between those who suffered and a public who did not”²³. Moreover, it acts as a “bridge between unspeakable suffering and the public need of learning and subsequent activation”²⁴. Likewise, the specificity of the language of sound was especially helpful since it allowed them to go back to the past and bring into the present the spectral presence of their beloved ones through the evocation, the subtle suggestion of the fragmented, disjointed and diffused pieces that formed an incomplete and broken memory. The sound has this potentiality of communicating “other non-semantic expressive levels of language”²⁵. Precisely for this reason, it is a kind of monument that, instead of simplifying the experience of violence or trying to reduce it to a single narrative, makes it more complex by using sound as a symbol of evocation, as a catalyst of memory. In this sense, it entails a completely different understanding of the violent past that highlights the necessity to live with the spirits, remember them, and create such a memory that embraces their apparition. This kind of memory site is

necessary, not only because there is a need to speak (out), but also a need to speak to, in order to remedy the ignorance of the segment of humanity that is in charge of the further management of the culture that allowed the suffering to occur.²⁶

Artworks like this call the attention of those who have not been able to see or understand the scope of violence. This type of intervention can at least open up questions about what has happened in Colombia during the war years and, therefore, about how to prevent something like this from happening ever again.

4. Conclusion

The memory and articulations of the past in Colombia have been, and still are, a battlefield. The hegemonic narratives disseminated by those who hold the political and mediatic power in the country pull towards oblivion; silence; the homogenization of history; and the understanding of the past as a closed entity that must be left behind. This understanding, in its urge to look forward to the future, as the storm of progress, forgets and denies the painful past, and therefore, displays certain violence and injustice to those that are not present anymore. Within this context, artistic practices and projects such as *Cantos silentes en cuerpos de madera* emerge as a way of

²¹Castillejo Cuéllar, “Iluminan Tanto Como Oscurecen: De Las Violencias y Las Memorias En La Colombia Actual,” 48.

²²Vásquez, “Cantos Silentes En Cuerpos de Madera.”

²³Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo’s Political Art*, 129.

²⁴Bal, 129.

²⁵Ochoa, “A Manera de Introducción: La Materialidad de Lo Musical y Su Relación Con La Violencia,” my translation.

²⁶Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo’s Political Art*, 129.

resistance against this violence of oblivion. This artwork draws attention to the necessity of paying the symbolic debt of remembering to the thousands of people that have been victims of the horrors of violence in Colombia. Moreover, it pulls towards the recognition of the multiplicity of experiences of violence, which makes us turn our gaze towards the marks that the war has left in people's daily lives, and that have led them to the fracture of their usual meaning. This focus on the multiplicity and heterogeneity enriches the understanding of violence and conflict, in the sense that it is listening and gives voice to those who have been often excluded. This happens through the use of a symbolic language that inhabits the fracture of meaning characteristic of the experience of violence. Therefore, it seems urgent to pay more attention, and to listen closely to the discourses and narratives that are being produced in other places, different from the dominant ones. The multiplicity of experiences of violence need to be heard, since they will help us to better understand the complexities of the war, as well as how these wounds that the conflict left in the Colombian population, can be repaired. Moreover, through the analysis of this artwork we could grasp on the importance that artistic practice can have in the configuration of more just relationships with those who have suffered, and in a more general account on the possible interventions that art can have in political matters.

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